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Secular Humanism and Politics An Unapologetically Liberal Perspective

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Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

—Humanism and Its Aspirations; Humanist Manifesto III

OVERTURE: SECULAR HUMANISM VERSUS POLITICS?

Secular humanists are often uncomfortable tackling political issues that do not directly concern the rights of nonbelievers. We can easily rally against patent irrationality and religious fundamentalism, we gladly fight in defense of the teaching of evolution, and we strongly affirm that morality is possible without belief in a god. Yet, when it comes to more practical political debates, such as those about war, social policies, or the environment, we become squeamish indeed. Why?

There are some good reasons for this attitude. Perhaps the most important, and enlightened, of them is that secular humanists don't think they have a monopoly on truth. From this perspective, then, it is understandable how members of humanist groups end up criticizing their leadership if it endorses specific political positions. As oriental mystics would say, there is more than one way to climb a mountain, and the important thing is to reach the summit.

But what's on the top of this common mountain that we all wish to climb while respecting other people's alternative paths? If you're a secular

humanist, presumably you are concerned with the welfare of humanity at large, so that the peak of the mountain is reached by whatever means improve—as virtue ethics philosophers have put it since Aristotle—human “flourishing.” Since there are many ways for humans to flourish, the argument may go, who is to say that one set of social policies is better than another when it comes to complex social problems?

I believe that this agreement is largely a way to avoid the issue, mostly out of fear of losing a chunk of secular humanists who consider themselves libertarian. The fear is well founded, since libertarians do make up a (small but vocal) component of the political spectrum in general and tend to be relatively more common among humanists because they are usually repelled by the religious rhetoric of mainstream and right-wing currents in modern politics. Nonetheless, secular humanists *ought* to engage in political issues simply because wanting a better world for all human beings is an essential component of the humanist philosophy itself. If this wish means an open dialogue, even an occasional clash, within the humanist movement, so be it. There may very well be more than one way to climb the mountain of human flourishing, but a humanist still needs to find the least painful route(s) and to argue in defense of beneficial social policies.

My personal attitude about libertarianism is rather ambivalent. I do agree that government intervention should be limited, an idea that is largely consistent with leaving the maximum latitude of action (and hence room for flourishing) to the individual. However, it is also undeniable that human beings need some restraint imposed from outside, or they inevitably end up limiting someone else’s flourishing in the name of individual freedom.¹ The question, then, becomes not *whether* the government should have the power to impose restrictions on its citizenry, but *how much power* it should have and *what checks and balances* should be put into place to minimize abuse on either side.

In this essay, I briefly examine five compelling social and political issues that I think should be at the top of the agenda for secular humanists. I realize that my particular view of these issues, not to mention the solutions proposed, is and ought to be a matter of debate. But if we don’t allow such discussions in the open for fear of endangering the very idea of secular humanism, we will engage in a sterile exercise, proposing a philosophy that has little to say to the world other than that people who don’t believe in God should have the same rights as everybody else. While the latter claim is obviously important (and, astonishingly, still needs to be

defended even in a democracy like the United States), it had better not be all there is to humanism. Surely, a tradition that can trace its philosophical roots to Socrates, Locke, Hume, John Stuart Mill, and Bertrand Russell, to name but a few, can and ought to do better than that.

CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES: THE MANIFESTED UNFAIRNESS OF AMERICAN ELECTIONS

The United States of America is the self-professed greatest democracy in the world. Besides the obvious offensiveness of such a claim to countries that are equally democratic and that have had a longer history of civil liberties than the United States, the structure of the American electoral system partly belies the claim as has been painfully demonstrated by the now infamous squabble between George W. Bush and Al Gore as to who really won the 2000 presidential elections.

Let's start with Democracy 101. Ever since ancient Athens, democracy has meant the rule of the people (although for a long time the "people" did not include women, economically "lower" classes, and slaves). By that simple criterion, the American system is undemocratic because it allows someone who lost the popular vote to win the presidential election—as did in fact happen to Bush and a few others before him. This bizarre situation can occur because US citizens don't really vote; electors chosen by each state do. And since each state is guaranteed a certain number of electoral votes that is not commensurate with its population, rural states are overrepresented and Bush won by acreage rather than votes. As a citizen of New Hampshire famously put it during one of many interviews the media broadcast after the 2000 elections, "If we went to a proportional system, New Hampshire would count for nothing." As it should, if the United States were really a democracy (as in "the rule of the people").

According to historians, there was originally a good reason for such a peculiar system. The United States were not really united but rather resembled a Swiss-style confederation of largely independent entities. Under those conditions, it was only natural to give precedence to the abstract entity of a "state," rather than to individual citizens. One could argue that the United States has never really become a nation—witness the harsh debates and court rulings on the limits of state versus federal power—but the fact remains that such a system is anything but democratic.²

A second major fault with the electoral system of the greatest democ-

racy in the world is that typically only a minority of its population bothers to go to the voting booth. Furthermore, Republicans in Congress have strenuously fought to keep it that way, for example, opposing bills such as the motor voter registration act, which makes it easier for people to register to vote. In other democracies, the percentage of people casting their ballots is much higher than the American average, and people are automatically registered based on their biographical data (they receive the registration at home when they turn eighteen—but, of course, such a procedure would mean that the government needs to know who you are and where you live).

The American electoral situation is so bad that several years ago the Christian Coalition devised a tactic to get their favorite people elected, called “the 12 percent strategy.” Since about 50 percent of eligible Americans are actually registered to vote, and of these little more than half bother to show up to cast their ballots, one needs to get the vote of half of these (roughly 12 percent of the whole population) to be ensured victory. On top of this, add the even stranger primary system, in which only a tiny fraction of really dedicated people vote, thereby dramatically influencing the general election by eliminating candidates who might do well with the population at large but don’t fit the opinions of a skewed minority of activists. Here is some food for thought: Twenty million more Americans watched the 2001 Super Bowl than cast their vote in the 2000 elections.³

One could go even further and suggest that no current voting system is actually democratic, no matter the country in which it is implemented. An article by Dana Mackenzie in *Discover* magazine (November 2000) clearly demonstrates why. It turns out that people have been studying voting systems for quite a while, and better options than the proportional system adopted by most countries have been clearly devised—indeed, they have been historically used by different cultures in different times.⁴

Perhaps the simplest alternative is approval voting, which dates back to the thirteenth century, when it was used in Venice to elect magistrates. In this system, a person casts one vote for every candidate that he or she considers qualified. It works much like an opinion poll, with the difference that the results are added up to determine the winner. One of the advantages of approval voting is that one can vote for a candidate likely to lose—say, Ralph Nader of the American Green Party—and not feel like one is wasting one’s vote: Nader (say) will get a good percentage of points while the voter can also cast a preference for somebody who is more likely to actually win. If approval voting had been used in the 2000 U.S. elections, John McCain would have won, based on polls conducted in Feb-

ruary of that year. Furthermore, approval voting would have spared Minnesota from electing professional wrestler and buffoon-at-large Jesse Ventura and New Hampshire from handing the state's primary to radical right-winger Pat Buchanan in 1996.⁵

Another alternative to standard voting systems is the Borda count, named after Jean-Charles de Borda, a French physicist and hero of the American Revolution. This system, which was actually in use in the Roman senate at least since 105 CE, is similar to the method used to rank football and basketball college teams: Each voter ranks all the candidates from top to bottom. If we take a poll by the *Sacramento Bee* during California's open primaries in 2000, McCain would have beaten Gore 48 to 43, Gore would have bettered Bush 51 to 43, and McCain would have surpassed Bush 50 to 45. Overall, the final rank would have been McCain 98, Gore 94, and Bush 88.⁶ Quite a different outcome from what actually happened!

With both the approval and the Borda methods, voters are asked to provide information that is missing from the current system: who they will pick if their favorite is eliminated. The result is more power to the voters, a better democracy. Of course, neither of these alternatives is perfect, but the point is that most people in the United States don't even realize that their way is one of the worst among those currently practiced by the world's democracies, and serious discussion hasn't begun in any country (except Australia, which does use a more sophisticated ranking method) on how to improve the actual democratic value of voting. Given that we have to live with the results for several years to come, wouldn't it be worth taking a serious look at the alternatives?

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: GAYS IN THE MILITARY AND OUTSIDE OF IT

I have never understood what the "gay problem" is all about. As far as I am concerned, the moral aspect is simple: As long as the people involved are consenting adults, what they do in their bedrooms is exclusively their own business. Unfortunately, many people who are otherwise adamantly against any government interference in the private lives of citizens (e.g., business practices or gun control) cry out loudly for a government-imposed "morality" that extends from the treatment of gays to abortion practices and school prayer.

It was therefore no surprise when in November 2002 the US Army dis-

missed nine of its linguists—all experts in crucial languages for the “war” against terrorism, such as Arabic, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese—invoking that most unfortunate Clinton doctrine, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that has regulated dismissal of gays from the military over the past few years.

As readers may remember, President Clinton started out his first term with two bold moves, one of which was an executive order that would have made it as normal for gays as it is (now) for blacks to be in the army (the other was the call for a universal health care system, which ended in catastrophe despite Democratic control of both the House and Senate). Soon came harsh criticism from the Far Right, coupled with the obvious fact that the gay community can’t muster more than a limited number of votes, which usually go to the Democrats, anyway. The predictable result was that Clinton “moderated” his stance and ended up proposing his infamous “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise.

From a moral perspective, the new policy makes no sense: One either thinks that a gay lifestyle is incompatible with the “values” of the military, in which case allowing gays to stay just because they don’t declare themselves is simple opportunism; or one thinks that the sexual habits of soldiers have no relationship to the functionality of an army, in which case the policy is an example of moral cowardice. Either way, Clinton, gays, and rationality lose, while bigotry scores points.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, of course, not only is there no evidence that the presence of gays in the military has any negative effect on the troops’ morale (remember, the same was said of blacks and women before those issues were settled), but at least one army—that of the Netherlands—openly embraces gay culture and doesn’t seem to be any worse for it.

More interesting, this and similar discussions (e.g., those about abortion and school prayers) show that the standard distinction between “liberals” and “conservatives” in terms of being respectively in favor of and opposed to a large role of government in our lives just doesn’t cut it. In reality, we need to consider at least two major axes along which political positions and public opinions can be distinguished: the “economic” axis and the “social” axis.

One can—apparently without contradiction—call for little governmental interference in economic matters and at the same time cry out for a large role for Big Brother in people’s bedrooms and public schools. Such a person would be a religious conservative. But it is also possible to be a libertarian and favor little or no government influence in any sphere of life

(except perhaps national defense). A third position is occupied by people who want a large role of government in the control of the economy (to balance the natural tendency of big business to act amorally or even immorally and with reckless disregard for the public good) but little in the sphere of personal life. Such a person would be a progressive liberal, like me. Then there is the strawman “pink” liberal that most people in America seem to love to hate, the person who wishes for governmental control of everything, communist style. This fourth position is essentially empty in this country (though certainly not throughout the world).

Reality, of course, is more complicated than this simple classification may hint at, but thinking along the two axes of economy and social issues at least brings us beyond the simplistic dichotomy of liberal versus conservative. It also strongly suggests that we should have at least three, and possibly four, parties to represent the four positions just sketched. Instead, we are forced to choose between two alternatives that don’t quite fit what a growing number of Americans actually think. I therefore propose to split the Republican Party into one branch of economic conservatives but social moderates and another branch of economic and social conservatives (the latter populated mostly by the Christian Right). Democrats could split into social and economic liberals on the one hand and social liberals but economic conservatives on the other. But who is going to force such healthy multiplication of political choices: the people, or the government? Alas, probably neither.

SOCIAL ISSUES: IT’S THE FUNDAMENTALISM, STUPID!

At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex situation, I propose that the major threat to modern democracies is not terrorism per se but ideological fundamentalism, particularly (but not exclusively) of a religious nature. Political fundamentalism has essentially disappeared, at least for now, with Fidel Castro as one of the few pathetic remnants, destined to natural oblivion, like all mortals.

The real problem now is religious fundamentalism, and in particular fundamentalism rooted in the twin monotheistic branches of Christianity and Islam (with Judaism ranking as a distant third only because it is numerically much less represented worldwide). This is not, of course, because all (or even the majority of) fundamentalist Christians, Muslims, and Jews are willing to blow themselves into pieces to achieve a political goal or because

they are all bent toward the destruction of everything and everyone that disagrees with them. Far from it. But the fact remains that fundamentalism of any sort, by definition a form of extremism and therefore ill-suited to exist within a democratic and pluralistic society, easily breeds intolerance, self-righteousness, and even terrorism, of which the world has experienced the consequences all too clearly during the past few years.

Let us not make the mistake of dismissing the problem as simply a modern incarnation of the old (and certainly true) observation that political power exploits religious feelings and therefore the problem is with the desire for power and with people like Saddam Hussein (or George W. Bush), who want power and find it easy to manipulate the masses using religious appeals. Admittedly, that is happening, but Bush, I think, really believes that God is on his side, and so do Tony Blair, Hussein, bin Laden, and a host of other characters who are making a mess of the just-born twenty-first century.

The extremes to which Islamic fundamentalists (including Palestinians and their leader, Yasser Arafat, currently as pathetic as, but much more dangerous than, Castro) can go in the name of their version of the universal truth are well known and need not be belabored here. But the *New York Times* reported in the spring of 2003 about some comments by "mainstream" politicians in the United States and Israel that should be chilling to the bone of every rational and truly compassionate human being. For example, Benyamin Elon, a minister with the Israeli government, has been quoted as referring to cardinal principles of a possible Palestinian-Israeli accord, such as the idea of land for peace, as "clichés" to be overcome and has essentially called for ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. As an exponent of the latter has pointed out, can we imagine what would happen if somebody made the same casual suggestion about moving Jews out of their unhappy "holy" land?⁷

On this side of the Atlantic, things aren't much better. The extremes of the Christian Right are now documented in book upon book, but a recent addition is a declaration by Gary Bauer of American Values, who said that conservative Christians must accept the Abrahamic covenant as described in Genesis, by which God personally promised the land of Israel to the Jews, and that's that.⁸ Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, has been quoted in the same newspaper as referring to the West Bank using the biblical names of Judea and Samaria.⁹

It is simply astounding that a species that has conquered space, split the atom, figured out the essentials of its own origins, and invented

democracy is currently in the hands of people who still believe in the literal reading of a book written several thousand years ago. How can we vote into office, support, and take seriously a political class that on the one hand uses computers and jet airplanes but on the other hand firmly believes in the actual existence of heaven and hell—concepts invented by barely civilized human beings who slaughtered each other with swords and arrows? How much longer will we leave the future of the world in the hands of people so sure of their own viewpoint that they constantly affirm that God is on their side (on all of their sides, of course)?

I keep hearing of the existence of a “silent majority” of moderately religious people in Western democracies, and even among Muslims and Jews, who apparently have a distaste for the outrages of the extremists who govern them. Where is this silent majority? Isn’t it time they woke up and kicked these men out of office (or, if not elected, out of mosques, churches, and synagogues)? The worldwide antiwar demonstrations in 2003 may have been a signal that people are in fact waking up. But let’s keep the alarm clock ringing loudly, or Bush, bin Laden, and company will plunge us all back into the Dark Ages, and soon. And we call them “dark” for reasons other than the fact that electricity hadn’t been discovered yet.

DOMESTIC POLICY: ECONOMIC VERSUS SOCIAL HEALTH

Money can’t buy happiness. Apparently, everybody knows this except Americans, who keep thinking that economic prosperity automatically brings all sorts of goodies, from democracy in the former Eastern Bloc to satisfaction with one’s own life here at home. Well, the data are in, and the conclusion is that money really cannot buy happiness.

Perhaps the most astounding indication of this truism is a simple but powerful graph published by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy in 2002: it shows a steady increase of the US Gross Domestic Product from 1959 to the late 1990s. No question about it, America has obviously gotten richer. However, equally impressive—and much more disturbing—is the trend of the institute’s Index of Social Health, based on eleven indicators including child abuse, child poverty, high school dropout rates, average weekly earnings, unemployment, health insurance coverage, senior citizen poverty, health insurance for the elderly, food stamp coverage, access to affordable housing, and the gap between rich and poor.

The social index went up in parallel with the economic index until the late 1970s, when it began on a downward spiral that continues almost uninterrupted to this day.¹⁰ Apparently, there is no automatic link between economic prosperity and social health or, as a Brazilian general famously commented on that country's economic boom during the 1970s: "The economy's doing fine; it's just the people that aren't."

This discrepancy can be glimpsed by the comparison of a few simple facts. The "good" news is that, in the period covered by the Fordham analysis, the average size of a new home has expanded from 1,500 to 2,190 square feet; the number of cars has risen from one for every two Americans sixteen or older to one for every person of driving age (which basically means that the market is saturated); the number of Americans taking cruises each year has risen from 500,000 to 6.5 million; the production of recreational vehicles has soared from 3,000 to 239,000 per year; and the number of amusement parks has leaped from 363 to 1,164.¹¹

Now for the bad news: Suicide among America's young people has increased 36 percent since 1970 and is triple the rate of 1950; the gap between rich and poor in the United States is approaching its worst point in fifty years and is the largest such gap among eighteen industrialized nations; average weekly wages, in real dollars, have declined 19 percent since 1973; the United States still leads the industrial world in youth homicide; America has more children living in poverty (14.3 million) than any other industrial nation; 43 million Americans are without health insurance (the worst performance since records have been kept), and the number has increased by more than one third since 1970; and finally, violent crime remains almost double what it was in 1970, even with substantial improvements during the 1990s.¹²

This picture makes little sense if one insists on accepting the equation "more money = better life." Of course, money does make a difference for both individuals and societies. After all, the economic and social health indices did grow in parallel for almost two decades. To paraphrase Karl Marx, before you can work on the meaning of your life, you have to have enough food in your stomach. But once peoples and societies reach a certain degree of economic prosperity, things become a bit more complex.

One of the complicating factors in the United States is that the huge gap between the rich and poor is not counterbalanced by a social net to help the poor improve their health, obtain an education, and, therefore, find a job. This deficiency relates to what is perhaps one of the most dangerous myths of American society: that this is the land of opportunity. Sure, it is if you are

in the highest socioeconomic classes and you wish to keep accumulating wealth across generations, as several dynasties of magnates have done since the beginning of the industrial history of this country and continue to do now (Vanderbilt and Trump come to mind as just two examples among many). This is also the land of opportunity in a rather more limited fashion, for example, if you are a poor immigrant aiming at saving your family from starvation, perhaps even getting to possess your very own VCR. But upward mobility in the United States (or the myth of “from the log cabin to the White House,” as it is sometimes referred to) is actually no different, or even worse, than that in most other industrialized countries, when one bothers to use real data instead of political rhetoric. The American poor are actually locked into their status: 54 percent of those in the bottom 20 percent in the 1960s were still there in the 1990s, and only 1 percent had migrated to the top 20 percent. The United States has the lowest share of workers moving from the bottom fifth into the second fifth, the lowest share moving into the top 60 percent, and the highest share of workers unable to sustain full-time employment.¹³

Next time you are told that you live in a society where everybody can become president or, better, the CEO of a large company, ask about the actual numbers instead of unrepresentative anecdotes. You’ll be surprised to find out that the American dream is closer to a nightmare for too many people. Isn’t it time to wake up?

FOREIGN POLICY: IS THE UNITED STATES A ROGUE STATE?

The United States is without a doubt one of the best places in the world to live, and I am grateful that I am here. It is a fairly liberal democratic republic, which—even though by no means perfect—seems to be the best that humankind has been able to engineer so far. This said, let me make a case for the idea that the United States is, in fact, a “rogue” state and that it, therefore, cannot rationally use the label on other nations as an excuse to attack them, as it did with Iraq in 2003. Let’s start from the basics: The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *rogue* (first meaning) as “Dishonest or unprincipled person; mischievous child.” I assume that we can transfer this definition to the level of state although that raises interesting philosophical questions about the “character” of a nation, which we will need to set aside for now.

Here, then, is my evidence that the United States is the mother of all modern rogue states. First, arguing for a preemptive strike against another sovereign nation is in direct violation of the United Nations charter and therefore puts the United States outside of the international community. For a nation to vow to abide by a certain code of conduct and then refuse to do so when it is inconvenient for its self-interest surely qualifies as “mischievous” behavior.

Second, the United States has consistently avoided joining the international community in a number of treaties that have—ironically—seen it side with “rogue” states such as Libya, Iran, and Iraq (in other words, seen from outside, America looks like part of the “axis of evil”). Examples include backpedaling on the Kyoto accord on the environment; refusing to join the anti-land mine treaty; refusing to join and actively sabotaging the international tribunal. It is “dishonest” and “unprincipled” to ask other nations to respect international law and then arrogate for one’s own nation the right to violate it.

Third, before the onset of the second Iraq war, the United States allocated funds to train anti-Iraqi militias recruited among the many dissenting minorities harassed by Saddam Hussein. How, exactly, is this not equivalent to setting up a terrorist training camp? Is it just because these people will be doing the dirty work for and not against the United States? Because we are right and they are wrong? I am reminded of a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode in which an otherwise seldom judgmental Captain Picard is reproaching a defecting Romulan general for his past military actions against the Federation. The general reminds Picard that one people’s butcher is another people’s hero. What should distinguish the United States as a liberal democracy is not only its principles but the way they are defended. If the end justifies the means—Machiavelli-style—then the United States is moving perilously close to the sort of behavior that it condemns in others.

Which brings me to the fourth point: Surely the 2003 aggression against Iraq cannot seriously be framed as a defense of democracy. Doing so would be another example of dishonesty and lack of principles. If the United States is really interested in democracy, why did it decide to attack puny Iraq and at the same time give permanent normal trade relations status to, say, China? Have we forgotten Tiananmen Square? Do we really think that the Chinese leaders threaten their people less than Hussein did his? And don’t we know that the Chinese (or the North Koreans, or the Pakistanis) have plenty of weapons of mass destruction, while the ones that were allegedly all over Iraq have never been found? I am not, of

course, suggesting that the United States declare war on China, North Korea, or Pakistan—just that it be a bit more consistent (and principled) in its foreign policy.

Being a rogue state in the sense in which the United States surely is can, and has been, defended on rational principles. Robert Kaplan, for example, has written a book entitled *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, in which he argues that the United States, as the only superpower in the world, *should* behave outside of international law. Indeed, Kaplan criticizes most American politicians for being held back (ironically, I would add) by their Christian ethos. In fact, he claims that they should explicitly embrace Machiavelli's "pagan" attitude and do what needs to be done.¹⁴

Kaplan's dichotomy is, I think, the real conundrum that the United States has to resolve during the twenty-first century. Does the United States of America want to be seen by the rest of the world as a principled nation, fighting fairly for what it sees as right, or does it want to be viewed as a Machiavellian entity willing to lie and cheat to get whatever it feels is due it? The American people should think hard about the question, because the answer will determine how history will see the United States and, more important, how this country is already affecting the lives of millions of people on this planet.

CODA: WHAT IS A SECULAR HUMANIST TO DO?

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, I don't pretend that this analysis is either comprehensive or beyond reasonable discussion. On the contrary, it is meant to stimulate further thought by my fellow secular humanists (and any other rational persons of goodwill).

The main points that I wish to drive home are these:

1. Secular humanists have a *duty*—if they take their philosophical position seriously—to engage in political discourse, no matter what the consequences, both within and outside of the movement. Not to do so relegates humanism to an irrelevant corner of the human polity.
2. Secular humanism is far more compatible with a liberal view of political issues than with a libertarian one (I assume that the reader will readily agree that religious zealotry and right-wing

Machiavellianism have, by definition, no place within humanism). Liberals and humanists alike view human beings as social animals, which means that our well-being as individuals depends crucially on the well-being of society at large.

To elaborate on the second point, though still simplifying quite a bit, one can think of humanity according to one of three main frameworks—each corresponding to a specific social and political system.¹⁵

1. If we emphasize the social aspect of the human animal, we may become sympathetic to a Communist view of society. I do not mean here the realized Communist regimes of the former Soviet Union or China—those are much better seen as examples of a dictatorship or an oligarchy (respectively) built on the *excuse* of communism. A true Communist society would work on the assumption that people are genuinely happy to share resources with other people for the common good—no compulsion would be needed. Experiments with “communes” in several Western countries approach this ideal but, of course, are much too small to constitute a realistic political test of the concept.

2. At the opposite extreme, one can think of human beings as essentially individualistic and put forth the libertarian ideal that the more people are left alone to do what they wish, the better society at large will be (a social version of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” in economics). There are no historical examples of such societies, but the current situation in the United States comes as close to it as we have ever been.¹⁶

3. Somewhere in the middle (and, with various possible combinations), we could conceptualize human nature as a mixture of social and individualist instincts—much as is the case with many other social primates. Under such circumstances, it makes sense to build a society that attempts to leave as much space as possible to the individual for flourishing while at the same time striving to guarantee basic necessities and rights to everybody. Most Western nations implement this model although their position on the continuum between total individualism and total socialism varies.¹⁷

It seems clear to me that option 3 is by far the most desirable, but it presents two major obstacles that secular humanists can help to overcome. First, as I mentioned earlier, a type-3 society can be realized in a variety of ways, with different degrees of balance between individual rights and social good. This balance can be identified by a combination of rational discourse and social experimentation (social problems are usually much too complicated for armchair solutions only). This process has been

unfolding during the recent history of Western and non-Western democracies, and it will continue to do so for a long time to come.

Second, and more urgently, we face the risk of moving perilously close to a type-2 society. Now that the realization of type-1 experiments has been (at least temporarily) ruled out by the worldwide failure of “communism,” it is the opposite end of the spectrum that naturally attracts the most sympathy. And yet, that sort of society harbors horrors as great and as irreconcilable with human well-being as true communism would.

Secular humanists realize that humans are a kind of animal, partly conditioned by our biological evolution. We also recognize the power of cultural change and of rational thinking. We should therefore use these crucial starting points to engage in public discourse for the betterment of humankind, whenever possible, and regardless of who is sitting on the other side of the aisle. It is the humanistic thing to do.

NOTES

1. I once had a heated conversation with a fellow humanist of libertarian tendencies who wanted to convince me that property rights are natural and absolute. His example was that if he—by whatever “legal” means—happened to own all the water in a certain area, it was his *right* to deny me any, even if I was dying of thirst. Regardless of various obvious objections one could raise here (e.g., who says that water can be “owned”?), I simply don’t wish for the world to turn into that sort of selfish nightmare just because of property “rights.”

2. Incidentally, history may be about to repeat itself. As of this writing (end of 2003), the European Union is discussing a constitution for political unity. One of the hottest debates surrounding the process is precisely whether Europe should adopt a proportional system of representation for continent-wide elections or give each nation a single vote, regardless of its population. As with the US Constitutional Convention, small nations are arguing for the latter solution, while populous ones are happier with the former. As in the case of the United States in the eighteenth century, I’m afraid that the small nations of Europe will successfully blackmail the rest and inaugurate yet another large, only partially democratic conglomerate of spurious entities.

3. According to the federal government, less than 106 million people voted in the 2000 elections (Federal Election Commission, “Voter Registration and Turnout 2000,” <http://www.fec.gov/pages/2000turnout/reg&to00.htm>); 131 million people watched the 2001 edition of the Super Bowl, according to Nielsen Media Research (quoted in Christopher Stern, “Super Bowl Ads Stir Violence

Debate," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2001, http://www.superbowl-ads.com/articles_2001/html_files/SB_Ads_Stir_Violence.html).

4. Dana Mackenzie, "May the Best Man Lose," *Discover*, November 2000.

5. *Ibid.*

6. James Bennett, "The Exit that Isn't on Bush's 'Road Map,'" *New York Times*, May 18, 2003.

7. <http://www.fordham.edu/index.html>.

8. Gary Bauer, quoted in E. S. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

9. Tom DeLay, quoted in Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

10. Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002).

15. I am assuming here that the reader is not seriously considering a dictatorship or absolute monarchy as forms of government that in any way further human flourishing, and I will therefore not consider them at all.

16. I can already hear the protests of libertarians, but I am not claiming that the United States actually is a libertarian state (fortunately!), only that it has managed to approach that condition more closely than any other democracy. (It goes without saying that a libertarian state could exist only in a democracy, not in a dictatorship—be the latter secular or religious.)

17. Canada and several northern European nations seem to have reached a happy compromise in this sense. I would have moved there long ago if it weren't for the climate.

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